

# Resisting neoliberalism? Movements against austerity and for democracy in Cairo, Athens and London

ARMINE ISHKANIAN

*London School of Economics, England*

MARLIES GLASIUS

*University of Amsterdam, Netherlands*

## Abstract

Drawing on interviews conducted with activists from Athens, Cairo and London in 2013, we examine activists' understandings of, critiques of and concerns around neoliberal policies. We demonstrate that activists often imply, and sometimes explicitly formulate, a fundamental incompatibility between the current economic system and their conceptions of democracy, but also that 'anti-neoliberal' is a very inadequate label for describing their political positions and practices. We demonstrate how activists developed deeply interlinked critiques of both the political system and the economic policies that emanated from it. We maintain that at least as important as their discourses were their practices. We analyse how solidarity and self-help practices were perceived as political interventions, rather than acts of charity, through which activists confronted the state with its failure to provide basic services.

---

## Corresponding author:

Armine Ishkanian, Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, England.

Email: a.ishkanian@lse.ac.uk

**Key words**

activism, anti-austerity, democracy, neoliberalism, Occupy

**Introduction**

Since 2011, the world has witnessed an increase in protests across the globe as citizens have expressed their discontent with the prevailing economic and social policies as well as the political structures and systems of power. While only some of these movements, most notably Occupy, articulated an explicit critique of global capitalism and neoliberalism, the Occupy movements, the *Indignados* in Spain and Greece and the Arab revolts all linked the protests against growing inequality and precarity with demands for 'real' democracy (Ishkanian and Glasius, 2017).

In this article, drawing on interviews conducted with activists from Athens, Cairo and London in 2013 with follow-up interviews with key respondents in 2014–2015, we ask, how did 'square activists' in these three cities identify and frame linkages between capitalism and democracy? And, did they understand their activism as resistance to neoliberalism? Some argue that neoliberalism is the root cause of the worldwide protest movements and occupations that have emerged since 2010 (Della Porta, 2015; Tejerina et al., 2013). We demonstrate that activists often implied, and sometimes explicitly formulated, a fundamental incompatibility between the current economic system and their conceptions of democracy, but we also contend that anti-neoliberal is an inadequate label for describing the political stances of the activists in the three cities, for three reasons.

First, activists held diverse views, and by no means all who were active in the protests and occupations of the squares in Athens, Cairo and London identified 'neoliberalism' as the core problem. The squares movements brought together individuals who had shared grievances around the current economic and political systems but diverse political and ideological positions on the causes of the crisis and possible solutions. For many squares activists, neoliberalism was an abstract concept rather than a core mobilising issue.

Second, we discovered while investigating both anti-austerity protests and protests for democracy, that the critiques of the economy were inextricably linked to critiques of the current political system and of the shortcomings of representative democracy, in ways that the term 'neoliberalism' does not fully capture.

Finally, activist demands for social justice were translated into concrete practices of solidarity and self-help. **While we have concerns about the degree to which such practices can be scaled up, it is important to recognise them as attempts to construct alternative economic and societal models, rather than just practices of resistance to neoliberalism.**

The three cities discussed in this article had one important commonality: they all witnessed extensive and sustained mobilisation, including street demonstrations and an encampment, in 2011 or early 2012. Otherwise, we chose them for their differences, in order to discover to what extent commonalities between activists could be found even across such vastly different contexts, rather than comparing London with New York, Athens with Madrid, or Cairo with Tunis. The three cities represent a financial centre (London), an open aid-dependent economy (Cairo), and an economy in the midst of instability and crisis (Athens). We conducted field research in Athens together, developing a definitive interview guide that we used in the other cities. In each city, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15–20 respondents, most of whom were core activists in square occupations or other forms of direct action, while some were journalists, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions or political parties. We also visited solidarity centres and attended activist meetings. We defined as core activists those who have taken part in sustained street activism (often occupying a square) and/or direct action since 2011, and for whom activism was an important time commitment and part of their identity, rather than occasional demonstrators.

Following the initial contact, we selected interviewees via a snowball sample, but selecting for the greatest possible variety in political views, age, gender and class to reflect the much-noted diversity in the street protests. In Cairo for instance, we made sure to interview various shades of liberals, leftists and Islamists, young and old, male and female, English speakers and Arabic-only speakers. Because some activists could be placed at risk by identification, we have anonymised all by giving them aliases.

In the next section we engage with debates on neoliberalism and democracy, before examining the policy context in the three cities in the third section. In the remaining sections, we examine activists' critiques of the economy; how these are linked to their understandings of and demands for real democracy; and their alternative economic and solidarity practices. In the final section we discuss the implication of our findings.

## **Neoliberalism, democracy and movements of resistance**

Neoliberalism has variously been described as an ideology (Andersen, 2000; Hall, 1988; Hardt and Negri, 2001), a set of ideas (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013), a form of governmentality (Barry et al., 1996; Brown, 2015), a policy agenda (Venugopal, 2015: 165), a project (Harvey, 2007), or culture (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). Some challenge the all-encompassing, “macro-structural” explanatory approaches to neoliberalism (Collier, 2012: 186) arguing instead for “a more nuanced approach” which views neoliberalism

as a “mobile technology” or “logic” which mutates as it travels rather than “a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes” (Ong, 2007: 3). Despite the competing definitions, most authors writing about neoliberalism would probably agree that at a minimum, neoliberalism entails a focus on individual responsibility rather than collective meeting of needs (Dwyer, 1998; MacGregor, 2005) and tends to be characterised by a hostility to the “public realm” representing a combination of anti-welfarism and anti-statism (Clarke, 2004: 30). In this article, we understand neoliberalism to be a set of ideas that influence the formulation and implementation of social policy. However, we agree with those theorists who focus on the permutations and manifestations of actually existing neoliberalism (Collier, 2012; Ong, 2006) and the “contextual embeddedness” of neoliberal policies and projects and how they are produced within national, regional and local contexts (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 351). We consider not only how neoliberal social policies are shaped by the specific context, but also what it is that the activists in our three field sites critique and fight and how this is in turn shaped by local histories and political struggles. **Our interlocutors tended mostly to be concerned concretely with austerity policies and welfare cuts, and sometimes with privatisation policies, and with increased poverty and inequality as a result of such policies.** In discussing respondents’ conceptualisations and critiques of neoliberalism, we also highlight how these concerns were deeply connected to their apprehensions about the quality of democracy which they understood as undermined by the weak accountability of political elites and the growing influence of corporations and private interests in policy shaping.

A number of scholars writing about the resilience of neoliberalism argue that civil society actors, and in particular social movements, have an important role to play in articulating challenges against neoliberal ideas and policies. Crouch refers to civil society as “a fourth force” which is beyond the “triangular confrontation among the state, market, and the corporation” and which can “criticize, harry, and expose the misdeeds and abuses of the cosy triangle” (Crouch, 2011: x). He does not go so far as to claim that “the busy, but small voices of civil society” can create a “different social order from the corporation-dominated capitalism” but he sees an opportunity for civil society to “make life far better than states and corporations will do if left to themselves” (Crouch, 2011: x). Peck et al. also see an opportunity for social movements, but recognise the difficulties involved in taking “home-grown and organic initiatives, grassroots innovation, and socially embedded strategies” and moving them “to other places” so as to create a globalised resistance to neoliberalism (Peck et al., 2012: 27). **Thatcher and Schmidt argue that there has not been a Polanyian countermovement to the rise of neoliberalism, but hold out hope that “new ideas” and “interest coalitions” will emerge (2013: 421) and identify “social movements” as demonstrating “the greatest move away from neo-liberal ideas, at least at the level of political discourse” (2013: 426).**

Critical scholars have examined the relationship between democracy and neoliberalism, arguing that democracy will be in crisis until such time as the problems created by capitalism and neoliberalism are addressed (Crouch, 2011; Della Porta, 2015; Keane, 2009; Merkel, 2014; Streeck, 2014). They warn of the hollowing out of the democratic state by late neoliberal capitalism and recognise the importance of movements in challenging prevailing views, but acknowledge how inequalities of power between movements and market and state institutions may limit their impact (Badiou and Gauchet, 2016; Brown, 2015). Della Porta characterises the recent movements as an expression of “grievances with neoliberalism”, arguing they are responses to the “crisis of/in a late neoliberal system ... which takes the form of a crisis of responsibility” (Della Porta, 2015: 4, 6).

As we demonstrate, despite the differences in political and economic systems across our three cities, there were shared understandings as the majority of our respondents articulated deeply intertwined critiques of the economy and the political system that often encompassed, but also went beyond, critiques of neoliberalism and embodied wider concerns about the weakening of democracy. There were also shared practices that extended beyond protesting and occupying public squares to include establishing solidarity initiatives for mutual support and assistance. We argue that these forms of solidaristic action, which were widely described by our respondents as political interventions rather than philanthropic acts of charity, represent an inherent rejection and subversion of the neoliberal logic that goes well beyond the expression of grievances.

## Actually existing neoliberalism: The policy contexts

All three cities in our study have experienced neoliberal restructuring over the past three decades, but given the variation between the three national contexts and the existing welfare configurations, in this section we examine the specificities and manifestations of neoliberal policies in each context. Our aim in this article is not to discuss in detail specific social policy changes that have been implemented in the three cities over a period of nearly three decades, as we lack the space for such a discussion. Instead, our aim is to examine shared practices of resistance and contention in three cities that have experienced neoliberal restructuring, to varying degrees since the 1980s.

Countries in the global South have had a much “longer (and harsher) exposure” to neoliberal policies (i.e., structural adjustment) and austerity than the countries in the North (Clarke and Newman, 2012: 300). In Egypt, neoliberal policies of privatisation and liberalisation were first introduced in 1974 through the adoption of the open door (*infitab*) policy by President

Sadat. The objectives were to create a “good business climate” and to address the failures of planned industrialisation which had been a core element of Nasser’s Arab socialism (Bogaert, 2013: 222). Over the next three decades, the Egyptian government, acting on the advice of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), introduced a number of investor-friendly programmes and laws, including the 1991 Economic Restructuring and Adjustment Programme (ERSAP) which led to the “liberalisation of trade and prices, the introduction of flexible labour legislation and the removal of progressive social policies” (Joya, 2011: 370). The liberalisation of the economy and the privatisation of public assets and the agricultural sector introduced under ERSAP were supposed to address existing inefficiencies, but instead became a new source of patronage and led to the concentration of wealth into the hands of a new economic elite closely allied with the ruling New Democratic Party and President Mubarak’s son, Gamal (Farah, 2009). In the 1990s real wages declined and poverty and inequality increased in Egypt, particularly in rural areas (Mitchell, 1999). The 2008 crisis further “deepened economic hardship in the country” and contributed to a rise in basic food prices (Abdelrahman, 2013: 574). The 2011 uprising was “the culmination of a long, intensive wave of protests” (Abdelrahman, 2013: 570), which were sparked by discontent with the political leadership and the economy (Bogaert, 2013; Joya, 2011).

Neoliberal policies, including cuts to public spending and welfare benefits, increased market discipline and the disciplining of trade unions, were first introduced in the UK by the Thatcher government in the 1980s (Gamble, 1989). Despite claims of their being “post-ideological” (Powell, 1999: 23), some characterise New Labour as accepting the “neoliberal underpinnings” of previous Conservative governments (1979–1997) particularly in the fields of employment legislation and industrial relations (Smith, 2009: 338–339) and other areas of social policy. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government elected in 2010 implemented the largest welfare spending cuts since 1921–24 (Lupton et al., 2013). In England, austerity policies since 2010 have included cuts to public sector spending, pay and welfare provision; the proposed and actual privatisation of public services (including the National Health Service [NHS]); and the introduction of user fees (including fees for higher education). While some of these policies, including the introduction of user fees for higher education and the privatisation of public services, pre-date the coalition government, since 2010 there has been an intensification of such policy approaches. The introduction and intensification of austerity policies triggered a rise, beginning in 2010, in anti-austerity mobilisations and protest groups at the local level and nationally (e.g., the People’s Assembly against Austerity) (Ishkanian and Ali, 2018). These groups have linked the protests against austerity with demands for ‘real’ democracy and, at times, with a wider critique of neoliberal capitalism, arguing that at present there is little to distinguish the leading political parties whose stances they characterise as “cuts and cuts-lite” (Williams, 2015).

In Greece, the introduction of the 1985 Stabilization Programme marked a clear shift “towards a neoliberal strategy” which included economic restructuring and the curtailment of labour rights so as to “secure market efficiency and competitiveness” (Duman, 2014: 373), and the 1990s heralded an ambitious and contentious privatisation programme (Pagoulatos, 2005). The 2008 crisis, however, led to the “deepening of neoliberal policies and ruptured the previous socio-political arrangements” (Souliotis and Alexandri, 2017: 233). Some argue that the “pathologization of Greece” by European politicians and economists and its construction as “a paradigm of deviancy” in the wake of the 2008 crisis, furthermore created the grounds for introducing “exceptional” and “punitive” neoliberal social and economic policies (Mylonas, 2014: 307). Since 2009, successive Greek governments have introduced various policies prescribed by the European Central Bank, the IMF and the European Commission (i.e., the Troika) in loan agreements, known as ‘Memorandums of Cooperation’. These entailed “severe fiscal and economic adjustment measures” that led to “massive cuts in wages and pensions, drastic increases in taxation, the virtual dissolution of the public health system and a huge increase in unemployment” (Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou, 2017: 41). As the population in Greece experienced hardship, anti-austerity protests and strikes began in 2010 and culminated with the occupation of Syntagma Square by demonstrators in May 2011.

Despite the different historical trajectories and political and economic contexts, the introduction of neoliberal policies from the 1980s onwards and their re-entrenchment following the 2008 crisis, have led to increases in inequality and poverty in all three contexts (Dorling, 2015; Lupton et al., 2013; Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014; Solava, 2011). Yet, as we discuss below, the protests, strikes and occupations of public squares, while driven by economic grievances, were also demands for greater democracy as understood as voice, participation and rule of law.

## Anti-neoliberal?

The squares movements brought together individuals with shared grievances around the current economic and political systems (i.e., the status quo) but who held diverse political and ideological views and allegiances, or in some cases, no allegiances at all (Peterson et al., 2015). Given the ideological heterogeneity of the squares movements, we argue that unlike earlier movements, most notably the alter-globalisation movement of the 1990s and early 2000s (Pleyers, 2011), the squares movements cannot be described as a coherent, globally interconnected, left-leaning movement against neoliberalism. Instead, the squares movements can be seen as embodying what Laclau and Mouffe call “diverse antagonisms and points of rupture” (Laclau and Mouffe,

1985: 191). For this reason, the after-lives of the squares movements have been problematic: the diverse grievances have not been translated into coherent strategies for action, leading instead to dissipation and fragmentation (Chabanet and Royall, 2015; Kreiss and Tufekci, 2013).

In all three cities, activists spoke about growing poverty, inequality, precarity (un/underemployment) and the loss of dignity, but relatively few used the term 'neoliberalism' or framed their protest as explicitly 'anti-neoliberal' or 'anti-capitalist'. In London, some respondents (Jake, Leo, Luke, Olivia) argued that the term 'neoliberalism' was primarily used by "NGOs" (Lucy) or by experienced campaigners. Therefore, while Olivia, who is an experienced activist said, "Every single one of us is fighting neoliberalism and it's going to be a long and bloody battle", Leo, another experienced activist who works with several community groups contended that the terms neoliberalism and social justice "were almost never used by local community groups" or activists, who instead talked about the cuts, loss of services and the difficulties in making ends meet. Luke explained that not everyone who was involved in the protests was cognisant of the wider ideological drivers behind current policy. He said,

People know what is wrong. But how do we get it across to people that they are systematically being exploited? ... To me what drives it is the dominant ideology. So, you've got Thatcherism arising out of Friedman and Hayek. Then we saw New Labour and Tony Blair, there is a sort of lineage there and we still have a decline in collectivity and a rise in individualism. Because they are promoting neoliberalism which is about individualism.

This sentiment was echoed at a public meeting of anti-austerity activists in London, where one participant said,

we have to understand that all of this is about the implementation of the neoliberal ideal, not just the [privatisation of the] NHS ... but for the average person in the street that abstract notion [neoliberalism] means nothing. You get them to start caring by making the issue relevant and tangible to them. People are struggling with day-to-day lives to make the demand for democratic process and reform a central concern. They care about what is being taken away from them.

Antonis, an experienced activist in Athens, was critical of some of the protestors in Syntagma Square who he argued did not have a good understanding of the wider political and structural causes of the current crisis. He said, "We had two types of people involved in the [Greek] Indignados. There was the middle class that was politically confused and had never voted. They were just shouting 'thieves'. But this for me is a dangerous slogan because



it doesn't see the structural problem and that this crisis isn't caused just by corruption."

Vasilis, an anarchist, explained why many on the political left criticised the Syntagma Square protestors, a view he disagreed with. He said,

for most of the purist anarchists and KKE,<sup>1</sup> who had only been involved in the steel strike and other strikes which they themselves had organised, they were very critical of the squares. They said it was too middle class, too nationalist and too many Greek flags. They couldn't understand at that time when people started going to the square that they need at some level to use symbols, like the flag, that they felt comfortable with. But for them these people didn't have the correct class orientation, so they criticised them.

Relatively few activists in Egypt used the term 'neoliberalism'. One was Malak, an experienced activist who described the ostensible divide between Islamists and secularists as "a fake vision. The fight is about how the Egyptians want to be governed ... Between those who believe in democracy and social justice on the one side and those who believe in a neoliberal autocratic system or Islam on the other side."

Another was Mahmoud, who described the 18 days in Tahrir Square as a time when "everyone care[d] about politics" and where the "upper middle class guys [were] sitting next to the very poor farmer". But he also saw it as full of "delusion" in which "No one even agreed upon this stuff. No one knew whether Egypt should take a neoliberal model or what." Others also reported a lack of consensus, and more specifically a distrust among common people of any political talk without concrete improvements in their lives (see also Bayat, 2015). As Ibrahim, a former Muslim Brother, who also made critical reference to neoliberalism, recalled:

I used to go to governorates, to villages, talking about politics, development, economic rights, human rights ... I have a very tragic experience in that. People don't believe, neither in politics, nor in NGOs. They don't believe in development. They don't believe in politics ... They suffer economically and socially. And they suspect everybody to be against them and make use of them. I lived in poor villages myself. People don't like politicians, they don't like media ... They want something touchable.

In this section, we considered the ways in which critiques of neoliberalism were articulated, or not, by our respondents. Elsewhere we have more fully examined how inequalities existing in society are at times (re)produced within self-styled democratic and egalitarian movements (Ishkanian and Glasius, 2017). Here we examined the criticism by some experienced activists of those who were new to activism around their lack of understanding of

underlying structural factors. Whether or not respondents specifically used the term neoliberalism or had the “correct class orientation” and understood the structural causes of the crisis as some of the more experienced activists did, the vast majority expressed their discontent with growing poverty, inequality, the loss of services and precarity (e.g., un/underemployment) and how these issues were not being addressed by their governments. As we discuss in the next section, the critiques of the economy and the failure of governments to act to reduce poverty and inequality, were interconnected with demands for greater voice and inclusion in decision-making processes and linked to the activists’ understandings of ‘real’ democracy.

## **Economic and political democracy: Demands and expectations**

Across our three cities, we found that the critiques of the economy were inextricably tied to critiques of the political system and of the shortcomings of representative democracy. Some scholars have argued that in this “age of austerity”, retaining the “neoliberal hegemony” depends on focusing on the “irrationality” of redistribution (Farnsworth and Irving, 2012: 133, 134) and portraying welfare spending as an “impediment to economic efficiency and global competitiveness” (Dean, 2012: 111). Drawing on Foucault, Brown describes neoliberalism as an “ideology” and a “normative order of reason”, which “assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects, and institutions of democracy understood as rule by the people” (Brown, 2015: 9). Brown is not alone in advancing this claim; several scholars warn of the hollowing out or destruction of democracy by late neoliberal capitalism (Badiou and Gauchet, 2016; Della Porta, 2015; Keane, 2009; Merkel, 2014). As we discuss below, many of our respondents saw democracy under threat by neoliberal restructuring, and saw their struggles for ‘real’ democracy as encompassing both political and socio-economic rights.

The nature of the debt crisis in Athens caused many to consider economic dictates as constituting the loss of democracy, arguing that these policies were being ‘imposed’ (Alexandros, Antonis, Athanasios, Athena, Eleni, Panagiotis, Stavros) by the Troika, albeit with the tacit approval and participation of the Greek government at the time. According to Athena: “[W]hat we see now is that with the debt and the crisis is the absolute loss of democracy. 90% of the Greek population is against austerity and we have had 24 general strikes, thousands have gathered in Syntagma Square in protest. But no one has listened to them.”

The demands of the protestors in Tahrir Square were bread, freedom and dignity, which Osama interpreted to mean “that people are not accepting trade-offs anymore. They will not trade freedom and civil liberties for social welfare and they will not trade social welfare for some sort of democratic

expression rather than democracy, because what we have now is democratic expression, not democracy”. Other Cairene respondents equally insisted that democracy required social and economic rights. According to Rania, the “democracy that I mean has social and economic demands and aspects to it. It’s not merely a political democracy”. And Karim echoed these sentiments: “The total economic freedom without the control of the state is not democracy. It’s no changes in education, it’s no democracy. No health insurance, it’s no democracy. And no social services, social insurance, not democracy”.

In London, activist discourses reflect the Thatcherist neoliberal heritage, but also the city’s status as a global financial centre. Activists spoke with alarm about the unrestrained dismantling of the welfare state, but were also scathing in their criticism of the influence of corporations and private interests in politics, arguing that the City of London was shaping the politics and policies of the government (Charlie, Jessica, Thomas), and leading to a “degradation of democracy and alienation and cynicism” (Sophie). William, an activist from Occupy London, found that:

our democracy is pretty unsatisfactory. And when you look at electoral fraud and this sort of revolving door between politics, business, and QUANGOs,<sup>2</sup> there is a cabal of people who are round tripping. You see it in the pharmaceutical industry where people who are regulating it are actually coming out of industry or are going back into industry. You have the whole of banking and economic regulation controlled by banking interests.

Some, but by no means all, of our respondents became explicit about the implications of their critiques, formulating the view that their conception of democracy was incompatible with the current global capitalist system. In London, Oscar said that in his vision “there is economic democracy and then democratic control over energy, food, and key basic needs”, adding almost casually, “and also democracy is something that is in conflict with capitalism”. Malak, a veteran leftist activist in Cairo, believed that “[W]hat we need to articulate is democracy that is more effective than what’s happening in Europe and North America ... Democracy of rich millionaires, when politics is decided by unelected leaders”. Yasmin, a previously apolitical young journalist from Cairo, was more pessimistic:

I don’t really believe in democracy. I’m a person who still thinks the rich people in the world control everything. If they want to bring someone to election, they will. And even if the people choose somebody and if he’s elected freely ... he does have to abide to international rules because the rich, the banks have all the power.

Similarly, Antonis argued that it is time to “redefine” democracy, saying, “[we] can’t say that democracy is that which was created of ancient Greece.

For me you can't have political democracy without economic democracy. It is impossible to have a neoliberal structure and a democracy."

For Vasilis, the movement allowed space to rethink political engagement through which people redefined "their sense of ownership of the country". He said,

my experience of Syntagma, redefined the basic contradiction between economic and political elites and the people. There was a serious redefinition of how the Greek people understood themselves vis-a-vis the political field, and not just as a voter or a party member. One of the main slogans of the Syntagma occupation was 'we won't leave the square, until we get rid of you!' People asked for more democracy and were redefining their sense of ownership of the county. There was a conflict between the old imploding political forms and the system and the springs of new forms of political activism.

In this section, we examined how activists articulated a critique of neoliberalism and linked it to democracy. Moving on from the discursive critiques and demands, next we discuss how activists identified the state as being primarily responsible for addressing poverty, inequality and social justice. Yet, in the face of the state's failure to meet the needs of individuals and communities, they also established local initiatives, such as community food banks and solidarity centres, to fill in the gap.

## Activists' solidarity practices

One of the key tenets of neoliberalism is the focus on individual responsibility (Ong, 2006; Venugopal, 2015) as individuals are expected to be enterprising and responsible in terms of managing their spending, saving and purchasing of services. Scholars have long argued that the introduction of neoliberal restructuring was accompanied by an expectation that non-state actors (both from the private and third sectors) would step in to fill the welfare gaps left by the receding state (Howell and Pearce, 2002). They have, and it can be pointed out that, willingly or not, in practice these non-state interventions often become "functional to neoliberalism" by doing what the state "used to do" (i.e., service delivery) instead of challenging or changing the systems that perpetuate poverty and inequality (Bebbington et al., 2008: 20). In all three cities activists criticised the failure of states to meet the needs of vulnerable citizens and to deliver social justice. Some overtly criticised the neoliberal trope of individual responsibility as a "nasty" (Lucy) or hypocritical discourse (Harry, Theodoros, Rania), arguing that while individuals were expected to act in a responsible manner, state institutions and private corporations were not always, let alone consistently, held to the same standards of responsible behaviour. For example, Lucy said,

there is the discourse of the individual getting control of themselves and getting themselves a job ... We pointed out once that when A4E<sup>3</sup> were not doing their task well of getting people into work, the government was like, well, the economic climate. But when it's about individuals [not finding work], then it's their fault ... That's a double standard.

In this section, we examine the solidarity practices that emerged in all three cities. We consider how these were viewed by the activists as political interventions and forms of resistance, rather than apolitical acts of charity or philanthropy. Of our three cities, Athens had the most solidarity initiatives, as activists spoke about the failure of the state to deliver services and support to those affected by the crisis and how this had led to the rise of solidarity initiatives. One of the slogans of the protestors was “No One Alone in the Crisis”. Solidarity actions included electricity reconnections to homes that were unable to pay their bills; the creation of food distribution networks; and the opening of solidarity centres in different neighbourhoods which provided hot meals, second hand clothing, classes, lending libraries, etc. Several of the activists were actively involved in different solidarity initiatives across Athens (Aiketerina, Alexandros, Anastasios, Eleni, Evangelos, Konstantinos, Nicholas, Spiros, Vasilis). During our fieldwork, we visited two such centres, both located in squats, in different parts of the city. Spiros, who was active in one of the solidarity centres we visited said,

We are responsible for things now ... We woke up as citizens in 2010. Before the crisis things worked on the individual level, in other words, people took care of their problems as individuals ... now Greek society is realizing that things have changed and that positive change will only come through community actions and struggles. Of course the political system is to blame, and you need to put on the table the issue of changing the political system, but this will only happen at the grassroots or else the political system will stay the same.

Eleni, who was involved in the same solidarity group, explained that the purpose of the solidarity centre wasn't to function as a 'charity' but to support people's self-organising. She said, “It is not just about giving them food, but teaching them how to fight for their rights themselves ... [this is] also a political intervention. We have a multi-dimensional approach to get people to participate and become part of the solution.”

Alexandros, who was involved in another solidarity centre we visited echoed Eleni's comments:

We [the centre activists] fully disagree with the activities of the [Greek Orthodox] Church and the mainstream media who promote philanthropy and charity. Helping people isn't about charity. It is to help alleviate them from the

crisis and to support them psychologically. That they also feel like participants and they are involved in the activities is very important. I believe the State's responsibilities have now been taken over by the people because the State does nothing.

And Vasilis, who was involved in a national solidarity movement that had ties to Syriza, argued, "The whole people are struggling for survival and it is very difficult to turn people into activists. We are accused of doing charity, but if you give someone the chance to survive, yes in some ways it does become charity. But what we are trying to remake is a political struggle, a constant struggle."

In London, despite the largest welfare spending cuts since 1921–24 (Lupton et al., 2013), the situation was not as severe as in Athens and solidarity centres were not as common, but they did exist and similar to Athens were often found in squatted spaces (e.g., the Cuts Café). Lucy explained how her local anti-cuts group wanted to create a local food bank that was not centred on the idea of charity. She said, "we talked about [creating] a food bank for the local area that is not run by the Christian associations ... it would be a solidarity thing if it came to fruition."

For Oscar, the issues of food security and fuel poverty were connected. He said, "People face a choice to either eat or to heat their homes" and added,

our ultimate aim is exactly that sort of solidarity, mutual aid based, radical form of action around [electricity] reconnection and sharing skills on how to fiddle your pre-payment meter so you can pay less ... A lot of people aren't paying their bills because they can't and it's not been organized by a political campaign, but it's a necessity thing. But yeah, our aspiration is to try and support and facilitate that and to become a larger political intervention that could highlight those issues.

Fred, a veteran activist from London, argued that instead of conceptualising solidarity actions as taking over the responsibilities of the state, and in effect letting the state "off the hook", we should think of such initiatives as a form of "responsability" (emphasis in the original). He said, "Yes, we are in a crisis and we have a choice of how we exercise our responsibility and what is our response to the crisis ... it is a two-front struggle: to continue self-organization and to the fight against the cuts."

Cairene activists spoke about continuing "charity work" or "*waqfs*" (Abubakar), where assistance is provided to the poor. But for Mariam social work<sup>4</sup> was not just an act of charity but rather a political action. She said,

I think social work is some other kind of political movement. I am currently taking care of community initiatives, this is how we believe we work for

reform in the current situation ... We are taking the responsibility from the government: in community initiatives, all the sectors that have been neglected, we're making an alternative. It started before the revolution, but increased after, everyone wants to be part of the scene. It is a kind of politics the government does not consider as politics, and hopefully they will continue to do so, so they leave us the space.

However, as Rania argued, while people were stepping up to support each other, it was ultimately the responsibility of the state to deliver on social justice. Linking responsibility to rights and the obligations of the state, she said,

Who do you demand social justice from? That's a trick question because the starting point is always the state. The state has the biggest responsibility and the state has obligations under Egyptian law, under international law, to make it sound legal, the state has concrete responsibilities to realize minimum standards of the enjoyment of human rights and specifically socio-economic rights to all its citizens without discrimination. But also the state has an obligation to make use of its resources in a way that would benefit the population and would progressively realize the rights of the citizens.

In this section we described how in the face of public spending cuts and growing poverty, solidarity initiatives created by movements began to fill in the gaps left by the absent or receding state. Activists spoke about taking over the responsibilities of the state, but instead of seeing this as an acceptance of the neoliberal status quo, they described their actions as a form of political intervention and solidarity rather than acts of charity or philanthropy. In this sense, the direct action and solidarity initiatives become forms of resistance to neoliberalism in that they subvert and reject the isolating tendency inherent in the neoliberal trope of individual responsibility. While recognising the important role solidarity initiatives played in helping people to survive in the context of crisis, none of our respondents considered such initiatives as permanent solutions that were intended to absolve the state of its responsibilities. Further research by one of the authors in 2016–2017 in Athens and London has found that while solidarity initiatives continue, there is a growing propensity to burnout and fatigue among activists.

## Conclusion

In this article we examined activists' understandings and critiques of neoliberal policies and showed that they often imply, and sometimes explicitly formulate, a fundamental incompatibility between the current economic system

and their conceptions of democracy, but also that 'anti-neoliberal' is a very inadequate label for describing their political positions and practices. We demonstrated how activists developed deeply interlinked critiques of both the political system and the economic policies that emanated from it. But not all respondents framed their critiques in terms of neoliberalism, or saw neoliberalism as the ultimate driver of democratic flaws and economic injustices. We maintained that at least as important as activist discourses were their practices: solidarity and self-help practices were intended as political interventions, rather than acts of charity, through which activists confronted the state with its failure to provide basic services.

Scholars have argued that the '2010+ protests' and the occupations of squares were an expression of anger and reflected growing concerns around the lack of democracy, social justice and dignity (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013), representing a tipping point in a globalisation of discontent, 'disaffection' (Biekart and Fowler, 2013) and 'indignation' (Calhoun, 2013). Yet the prospects of activist conceptions and practices of social justice, solidarity and democracy bleeding outward and upward into the transformation of society and of political decision-making are bleak. Instead, in Greece, in the UK and all over the western world, nativist populist movements have been on a rising trajectory, based at least in part on very similar sentiments of discontent with electoral politics and neoliberal policies. Egypt on the other hand represents an extreme case of a new type of governance that is as neoliberal as ever in its economic orientation, but much more repressive in its dealings with discontent. We agree with Crouch (2011) and Peck et al. (2012) that civil society remains an important space for collective action and dissent against neoliberalism, but given the ideological heterogeneity of recent movements, it remains to be seen what new alliances and fissures will emerge between the disaffected as they critique and contest the political and economic status quo.

### **Authors' note**

The views expressed are the authors' own and do not in any way represent the views or the official position or policy of the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Irum S. Ali, Meta De Lange, Evelina Gyulkhandanyan, Donna Middelkoop, Christina Psarra, and a researcher in Cairo for their research assistance. We have not named the researcher in Cairo out of concerns for their safety.

### **Funding**

This research was made possible through a grant from the Robert Bosch Stiftung (grant # 12.5.2400.0354.0).



## Notes

1. KKE is the Communist Party of Greece (*Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas*).
2. In the UK, a QUANGO is a semi-public administrative body which is outside the civil service but which receives financial support from the government.
3. A4E is the former name of PeoplePlus, which is a UK based for-profit welfare-to-work company.
4. Mariam's use of the term does not refer to professional services, but to volunteer work providing assistance and solidarity to community initiatives.

## References

- Abdelrahman M (2013) 'In Praise of Organization: Egypt between Activism and Revolution', *Development and Change* 44(3): 569–586.
- Andersen P (2000) 'Renewals', *New Left Review* 1(1): 5–24.
- Badiou A and Gauchet M (2016) *What Is To Be Done? A Dialogue on Communism, Capitalism, and the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Barry A, Osborne T and Rose N (1996) *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism and Rationalities of Government*. London: UCL Press.
- Bayat A (2015) 'Plebeians of the Arab Spring', *Current Anthropology* 56(supplement 11): S33–S43.
- Bebbington AJ, Hickey S and Mitlin DC (2008) 'Introduction', in AJ Bebbington, S Hickey and DC Mitliryn (eds) *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*. London: Zed.
- Biekart K and Fowler A (2013) 'Transforming Activisms 2010+: Exploring Ways and Waves', *Development and Change* 44(3): 527–546.
- Bogaert K (2013) 'Contextualizing the Arab Revolts: The Politics behind Three Decades of Neoliberalism in the Arab World', *Middle East Critique* 22(3): 213–234.
- Boukala S and Dimitrakopoulou D (2017) 'The Politics of Fear vs. the Politics of Hope: Analysing the 2015 Greek Election and Referendum Campaigns', *Critical Discourse Studies* 14(1): 39–55.
- Brenner N and Theodore N (2002) 'Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism"', *Antipode* 34(3): 349–379.
- Brown W (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Calhoun C (2013) 'Occupy Wall Street in Perspective', *British Journal of Sociology* 64(1): 26–38.
- Chabanet D and Royall F (2015) 'The 2011 Indignés/Occupy Movements in France and Ireland: An Analysis of the Causes of Weak Mobilisations', *Modern & Contemporary France* 25(3): 327–349.
- Clarke J (2004) 'Dissolving the Public Realm? The Logics and Limits of Neo-liberalism', *Journal of Social Policy* 33(1): 27–48.
- Clarke J and Newman J (2012) 'The Alchemy of Austerity', *Critical Social Policy* 32(3): 299–319.

- Collier SJ (2012) 'Neoliberalism as Big Leviathan, or...? A Response to Wacquant and Hilgers', *Social Anthropology* 20(2): 186–195.
- Comaroff JL and Comaroff J (2001) *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Crouch C (2011) *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dean H (2012) *Social Policy*, second edition. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Della Porta D (2015) *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dorling D (2015) 'Income Inequality in the UK: Comparisons with Five Large Western European Countries and the USA', *Applied Geography* 61(July): 24–34.
- Duman ÖS (2014) 'The Rise and Consolidation of Neoliberalism in the European Union: A Comparative Analysis of Social and Employment Policies in Greece and Turkey', *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 20(4): 367–382.
- Dwyer P (1998) 'Conditional Citizens? Welfare Rights and Responsibilities in the late 1990s', *Critical Social Policy* 18(4): 493–518.
- Farah NR (2009) *Egypt's Political Economy: Power Relations in Development*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.
- Farnsworth K and Irving Z (2012) 'Varieties of Crisis, Varieties of Austerity: Social Policy in Challenging Times', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 20(2): 133–147.
- Gamble A (1989) 'The Politics of Thatcherism', *Parliamentary Affairs* 42(3): 350–361.
- Glasius M and Pleyers G (2013) 'The Global Moment of 2011: Democracy, Social Justice and Dignity', *Development and Change* 44(3): 547–567.
- Hall S (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal*. London: Verso.
- Hardt M and Negri A (2001) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey D (2007) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Howell J and Pearce J (2002) *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Ishkanian A and Ali IS (2018) 'From Consensus to Dissensus: The Politics of Anti-austerity Activism in London and its Relationship to Voluntary Organizations', *Journal of Civil Society* 14(1): 1–19.
- Ishkanian A and Glasius M (2017) 'What Does Democracy Mean? Activist Views and Practices in Athens, Cairo, London and Moscow', *Democratization* 24(6): 1006–1024.
- Joya A (2011) 'The Egyptian Revolution: Crisis of Neoliberalism and the Potential for Democratic Politics', *Review of African Political Economy* 38(129): 367–386.
- Keane J (2009) *The Life and Death of Democracy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kreiss D and Tufekci Z (2013) 'Occupying the Political: Occupy Wall Street, Collective Action, and the Rediscovery of Pragmatic Politics', *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 13: 163–167.
- Laclau E and Mouffe C (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Lupton R, Burchardt T, Hills J, Stewart K and Vizard P (2013) 'A Framework for Analysing the Effects of Social Policy', *Social Policy in a Cold Climate: Research Note Series RN001*. London: LSE CASE.

- MacGregor S (2005) 'The Welfare State and Neoliberalism', pp. 142–148 in A Saad-Filho and D Johnston (eds) *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London: Pluto Press.
- Matsaganis M and Leventi C (2014) 'Poverty and Inequality during the Great Recession in Greece', *Political Studies Review* 12(2): 209–223.
- Merkel W (2014) 'Is Capitalism Compatible with Democracy?', *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 8(1): 109–128.
- Mitchell T (1999) 'No Factories, No Problems: The Logic of Neo-liberalism in Egypt', *Review of African Political Economy* 26(82): 455–468.
- Mylonas Y (2014) 'Crisis, Austerity and Opposition in Mainstream Media Discourses of Greece', *Critical Discourse Studies* 11(3): 305–321.
- Ong A (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ong A (2007) 'Neoliberalism as a Mobile Technology', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32(1): 3–8.
- Pagoulatos G (2005) 'The Politics of Privatisation: Redrawing the Public-Private Boundary', *West European Politics* 28(2): 358–380.
- Peck J, Theodore N and Brenner N (2012) 'Neoliberalism, Interrupted', in D Cahill, L Edwards and F Stillwell (eds) *Neoliberalism: Beyond the Free Market*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Peterson A, Wahlstrom M and Wennerhag M (2015) 'European Anti-austerity Protests: Beyond "Old" and "New" Social Movements', *Acta Sociologica* 58(4): 293–310.
- Pleyers G (2011) *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Powell M (1999) 'Introduction', in M Powell (ed.) *New Labour, New Welfare State? The "Third Way" in British Social Policy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Schmidt VA and Thatcher M (eds) (2013) *Resilient Liberalism in Europe's Political Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith P (2009) 'New Labour and the Commonsense of Neoliberalism: Trade Unionism, Collective Bargaining and Workers' Rights', *Industrial Relations Journal* 40(4): 337–355.
- Solava I (2011) 'A Tale of Two Egypts: Contrasting State-reported Macro-trends with Micro-voices of the Poor', *Third World Quarterly* 32(7): 1347–1368.
- Souliotis N and Alexandri G (2017) 'From Embedded to Uncompromising Neoliberalism: Competitiveness Policies and European Union Interscalar Relations in the Case of Greece', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 24(3): 227–240.
- Streeck W (2014) 'How Will Capitalism End?', *New Left Review* 87(May–June): 35–64.
- Tejerina B, Perugorria I, Benski T and Langman L (2013) 'From Indignation to Occupation: A New Wave of Global Mobilization', *Current Sociology* 61(4): 377–392.
- Thatcher M and Schmidt VA (2013) 'Conclusion: Explaining the Resilience of Neoliberalism and Possible Pathways Out', in VA Schmidt and M Thatcher (eds) *Resilient Liberalism in Europe's Political Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Williams M (2015) 'Direct Action Won the Argument on Tax Dodging, Now We Need to Change the Rules', *UK Uncut blog* [online], 27 January [<http://www.ukuncut.org.uk/blog/direct-action-won-the-argument-on-tax-dodging-now-we-need-to-change-the-rules/>], accessed 13 November 2015.
- Venugopal R (2015) 'Neoliberalism as Concept', *Economy and Society* 44(2): 165–187.

## Author biographies

**Armine Ishkanian** is an Associate Professor in Social Policy and the Programme Director of the MSc in Social Policy & Development in the Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science. Her main research interests are in civil society, democracy building, social justice and development. Her recent publications include: Glasius, M. and Ishkanian, A. (2015) 'Surreptitious symbiosis: Engagement between activists and NGOs', *Voluntas* 26(6): 2620–2644, which was awarded the Article of the Year of 2015 by the International Society for Third Sector Research; and Ishkanian, A. and Glasius, M.E. (2017) 'What does democracy mean? Activist views and practices in Athens, Cairo, London and Moscow', *Democratization* 24(6): 1006–1024.

**Marlies Glasius** is a Professor in International Relations at the Department of Politics, University of Amsterdam. Her main research interests are in global civil society, international criminal justice, human security and authoritarian rule. Her recent publications include: Glasius, M. and Ishkanian, A. (2015) 'Surreptitious symbiosis: Engagement between activists and NGOs', *Voluntas* 26(6): 2620–2644, which was awarded the Article of the Year of 2015 by the International Society for Third Sector Research; and Ishkanian, A. and Glasius, M.E. (2017) 'What does democracy mean? Activist views and practices in Athens, Cairo, London and Moscow', *Democratization* 24(6): 1006–1024.